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2016

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Utriainen , T 2016 , ' Ritually Framing Enchantment : Momentary religion and everyday realities ' , Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society , vol. 41 , no. 4 , pp. 46-61 . < <http://journal.fi/suomenantropologi/article/view/63058> >

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/215621>

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# RITUALLY FRAMING ENCHANTMENT: MOMENTARY RELIGION AND EVERYDAY REALITIES

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the idea that the ritual frame can create enchantment and that the dynamic of framing can also help in sustaining credibility of that enchantment in everyday secular life. The ethnographic case on which this exploration is based reflects currently popular engagements with angel practices. Mixing Christian and esoteric spirituality, these range from clearly bounded rituals to much more ambiguous, vague and often only momentary micro-ritualization, though all are involved in enriching and supporting quotidian life. A description of angel practices and rituals is followed by discussion of the notions of enchantment and the ritual frame. It is argued, first, that learning to frame the desired enchantment appropriately makes it possible and potentially powerful, even if it actualizes merely as 'momentary religion'. It is further suggested that dynamic ritual framing, which often takes place in women-dominated courses and workshops, also enables the practitioners to meet some of the critical responses offered by secular society to their enchantments. Specifically, by learning to key the ritual frame in and out it may become possible to keep separate while sensitively juxtaposing 'secular' and 'religious' realities simultaneously, and to navigate between often heterogeneous and complex social contexts.

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**Keywords:** enchantment, subjunctive, momentary religion, ritual frame, credibility, angel practices

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## INTRODUCTION

Ritual can be approached as a frame and action that makes a difference and changes perspective. Jonathan Z. Smith (1987: 109) introduced the idea that '[r]itual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the ways things are'. He continues that ritual highlights possibilities that are in some ways inherent in any action but it also 'relies for its

power on the perceived fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be realized'. Ritual is thus about both possibilities and actual realities. Adam B. Seligman (2010) writes that ritual presents and assumes a *subjunctive 'as if' mode* over life, and ritual is thus above all about potentialities, possibilities and creative illusion. With ritually framed and enacted subjunctive illusion, which is not a lie but something close to play, imagination and creativity, it becomes

possible to make a shift of perspective that helps to integrate and deal with inevitable complexities and fragilities of human life.<sup>1</sup> Ritual as a potentially shared perspective and enactment of ‘as if’, according to Seligman, makes the social world possible in the sense of imagining a common past and possible futures<sup>2</sup> despite evident existing differences, frictions and tensions. In present-day pluralizing societies, with their many coexisting religiosities and secularities, social worlds are numerous and often disparate, and it becomes an urgent challenge to find ways to acknowledge and engage with a number of coexisting worldviews and ontologies. This is why understanding the dynamic of ritual is timely.

By emphasizing the notion of ritual in understanding the subjunctive mode and its relation to the complexities of social life, from the level of casual everyday greeting to formal and regulated religious prayer, Seligman’s thinking shares some of Erving Goffman’s social psychological concerns with the many levels and aspects of ritualization of everyday life. This focus opens up the issues of *framing* and *credibility* as two notions highly relevant to ritual communication. Frame, and more specifically the idea of keying the frame which is central to Goffman’s formulation (1974), is the communicative device and instance that marks and sets up a ritual (Seligmann et al. 2008: 84–97). Don Handelmann (2008) provides one intriguing way of thinking about ritual frame that further enables the acknowledgement of such rituals and ritualization (Bell 1992) that are not always clearly bounded but more ambiguous and sometimes also tightly intertwined in surrounding non-ritual life. Moreover, modern society often questions the credibility of ritual—and its practitioners—in particular in the case of many religiously or ‘magically’ tuned rituals which are foreign or new to it. From what could

be called the perspective of managing social credibility, not only framing but also de-framing may become skills to be learned in secular social settings. Ritual framing may thus be an important dynamic and quite delicate skill for many to learn in complex modern society.

My article explores the issue of the dynamic of the ritual frame through a case study that deals with Finnish women’s present day lived religion which clearly entails some magical or enchanted aspects and elements. I will focus particularly on fleeting and sometimes only momentary micro-rituals of enchantment that very much intertwine with everyday life—subjunctive moments that come and go—and the particular ways in which they are framed and de-framed. After presenting the ethnographic case I discuss the notion of enchantment understood basically as experience and action wherein something extraordinary is acknowledged and brought in to meet and enrich everyday life. I inquire how the ritual frame, and learning to frame and de-frame, can become a dynamic instrument in dealing with complex communicative issues in contemporary personal and social life. My further question concerns the challenges of credibility that my research participants sometimes face when engaging in their extraordinary practices; these challenges can be posed by others as well as by themselves. I argue that it is often the delicate art or skill of playing with the ritual frame that is used in dealing with the credibility of enchantment in secular social life.

## RITUALIZING ANGELS

My case<sup>3</sup> comes from present-day urban Finnish society and relates to people who practice several kinds of angel rituals and ritualizing as well as what they themselves would sometimes call ‘angel magic’. This article draws on

material containing both individual and focus group interviews with over twenty people, ethnographic observation at several kinds of occasions where angel practices took place, a survey (N263) distributed at a lecture event by Lorna Byrne who is a popular Irish writer and angel healer, as well as media material and collected artefacts. The interviewees and other informants were mostly women from many walks of life for whom angels have become attractive and supportive; the popularity of angel spirituality and culture has been increasingly visible for some years now in Finland as in many other countries such as the US, UK, Norway and Estonia (Draper and Barker 2010; Gardella 2007; Gilhus 2012; Uibu 2013; Walter 2011; 2016). It has also recently raised the interest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church—at least in Finland and Norway—as well as that of many kinds of media (Gilhus 2012; Palmu et al. 2012; Utriainen 2013a). Very generally speaking angel religion is something that happens at the intersections of Lutheran Christianity and esoteric or alternative spirituality and it has also many links to commercial popular culture. I approach it as an example of contemporary unofficial lived religion in which it is easy to participate; relatively democratic, often practical and tactic in its aims and techniques; intimately connected to something extraordinary or otherworldly; and, especially in this case, particularly attractive to women<sup>4</sup> (Orsi 2005; McGuire 2008; Draper and Barker 2010).

Angel rituals include such practices as healings, meditations, angel card reading, angel visitations, several kinds of ‘angel magic’ and the interpretation of dreams. These practices are sometimes clearly bounded and framed rituals with set instructions and clear ritual keying—angel healing and meditation might be taken as examples of this. Some of these practices are, however, vague, momentary micro-rituals or

ritualizations and very much embedded in the everyday profane and non-ritual life to which they aim to bring a difference, such as a change of perspective.

*Angel healing*, or therapy, can be practiced in several ways and can be applied to oneself or to another person. In the version that I observed as part of an angel healing course,<sup>5</sup> the healer invokes the angels one by one to come and distribute their healing energies over the person being healed. The healer acts as a channel<sup>6</sup> for these energies and the basic gesture of the ritual is her rhythmically opening and closing her arms, thereby imitating the wings of the angels. The energies of the different angels can be visualized as different colours and any physical sensation or mental image experienced can be interpreted as a healing sign or message (Utriainen 2017). In *angel meditation*, the participants can be led on a visualizing journey in order to meet their own angel and receive a message to be interpreted by the group of participants. The messages delivered by the angels were mostly about work life, everyday family life and emotions. One of the interviewees, for instance, reported having received a sword with which to cut herself free from old emotional ties (Utriainen 2014). Angel healing and meditation are often marked by establishing a relaxed place and mood, lighting a candle, closing the eyes and playing music in the background.

*Angel visitation* is one means of bringing angels directly into everyday life. This practice circulated on the Internet in the form of chain letter asking people to invite angels for a few days’ visit in their homes. The practitioner prepared a small altar for the visiting angels in the form of a table covered with a white cloth with a white candle and a white flower placed on it. She wrote three wishes on a piece of paper and sealed it in an envelope to be opened later. At a precise time in the evening the candle was

lit and the door opened for the angels to enter. The visitors stayed for five nights, and every evening the candle was lit at the same time. The way the evenings were spent with the visiting angels varied; some of my interviewees reported having sat beside the table thinking about their wishes and what they learned about themselves through them; others had strongly sensed the benevolent presence of angels (or ‘something’); while still others merely lit the candle and worked on their home duties. This variation of experience and accounts reveals that the degree of intensity and seriousness with which people engage in this kind of practice varies.

Probably the most common minimal sign or message of an angel is a *feather* that one can see practically anywhere. Once, when I was leaving an ‘angel evening’ with one of the women participating, she saw a small gray feather on the ground in front of the house—as we had many times been told we might, if we kept our eyes open—and said it was definitely a sign of an angel. What happened in this quickly passing enchantment is that a material object was taken as a token of something not quite from this world but that made a difference to it. Moreover, this interpretation was communicated and shared between two people. Besides these examples, there were numerous accounts of how *angels provide domestic help*, by purifying people’s emotional energies or those of the house and protecting the home and children, for instance, or, often, giving support in situations of stress, suffering and uncertainty. These themes were also particularly well represented in the survey when people were asked why they turned to angels or other spiritual help. Angels also helped in quotidian tasks such as finding lost objects or parking places. Besides this, some interviewees found angels in their photographs in the form of balls of light, which were interpreted as exceptionally good omens.

The descriptions of meeting an angel vary in terms of the ritual boundedness of the circumstances; they also vary in how much preparation is demanded and in the ways they become socially transmitted, shared and communicated. These varying angel practices and moments, as documented in my materials, are instances when angels are regarded as possible and, to some degree at least, potentially present and real. The degree of realness or metaphoricity in how angels are understood likewise varies greatly: sometimes when an interviewee talked about angels she drew quotation marks with her hands in the air, but others found them an effective enchantment in the middle of quotidian life—even if only for a passing moment. In the words of one interviewee, however, ‘[One] definitely couldn’t be on [the spiritual path] 24/7’.

## FROM MAGIC TO ENCHANTMENT

There are several forms of magic in the modern world. Francoise Favret-Saada (1980) and Tanya Luhmann (1989) take their readers to settings of ritual magic as practiced in rural France in the 1970s and in urban England in the 1980s. Jone Salomonsen’s (2002) research analyses Wicca practices in San Francisco and Anna Fedele’s (2013) ethnography examines contemporary practitioners of a syncretistic Mary Magdalene cult in Southern Europe. The current appeal of both magic and ritual in the Western world probably partly links to secularization and disenchantment; Christian and particularly Protestant churches have purified much of their practice of ritual and magical elements, possibly encouraging people turn to alternative forms of religion or spirituality or to seek what they want outside religion altogether.

Magic also takes more complex and less explicit forms in modernity than purely ritual magic as, for instance, the volume *Magic and Modernity* edited by Brigid Meyer and Peter Pels (2003) testifies with its cases and examples that range from the use and effect of film and video in African countries to modern Western medicine. In the introduction, Pels (2003) links magic to the dynamism of revealing and concealing that is important in many power relations. Magic is thus involved in several kinds of social, cultural and political performative processes and technologies that hold more or less subtle symbolic and social power and seek *efficacy*.

In some instances it may become more accurate and to the point to talk about enchantment instead of magic. Enchantment can be regarded as an open-ended and flexible notion that expands the 'touch of magic' into varied social and cultural fields and contexts including everyday life. The Weberian notion of enchantment has become an approach developed in studies related to religion and its contemporary changes with regard to popular culture, for example (e.g., Partridge 2004; Salomonsen 2002; Utriainen 2012). The political philosopher Jane Bennett takes the idea of enchantment quite positively and seriously, and her articulation in *Enchantment in Modern Life* does not privilege religion but, instead, stresses the variety of secular enchantments:

Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies. One of those strategies might be to give greater expression to the sense of play, another to hone sensory receptivity to the marvelous specificity of things. Yet another way to enhance the enchantment effect is to

resist the story of the disenchantment of modernity. (...) To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday. (...) The disenchantment tale does reserve divine space for enchantment; in my alter-tale, even secular life houses extraordinary goings-on. (Bennett 2001: 5)

According to Bennett, only some forms of enchantment are 'religious' and she wants to emphasize precisely the non-religious forms, giving particular weight to technological enchantment. Even if we take a more descriptive approach than Bennett, as well as a more nuanced understanding of what is religious or secular, we can learn from her observations and approach enchantment as an often volatile power (perhaps of imagination, emotion, surprise, wonder and the dream-world) that touches many things such as religion, art, play, entertainment, politics and certainly commerce and commodification. It is possible to conceive of enchantment as a kind of a subjunctive mode of relating to the world as a reservoir or promise of possibilities, openings and new beginnings. These possibilities sometimes become an important element in opening up new perspectives and coping with hardships and suffering, and may thus have healing power (which can certainly also be used in manipulative ways). The notion of enchantment can also reveal turning-points at which religion can easily lose its presumed identity as 'religion' and turn into something else—art or entertainment, for instance. Conversely, art or entertainment can also, in some ways and in some situations, be taken as sacred or 'religious'.

Bennett notes that enchantment can happen either spontaneously or through deliberate strategies. She mentions magic but otherwise does not explicitly take up ritual as one



kind of strategy for giving rise to enchantment. However, ritual and ritualizing are powerful ways of inviting and cultivating the extraordinary and its effects. In ritual enchantment extraordinary, otherworldly or transcendent ‘somethings’ (beauty, spirits, energies, angels, intuitions) are invited to become part of, and are given a place in, everyday life. Contact with the extraordinary is not always or necessarily dramatic (sacred, overwhelming or totally other); instead it may be quite subtle and intimate as it is in several forms the angel practices described above (see also Csordas 2004; Luhrmann 2004; Stringer 2008; Utriainen 2013b<sup>7</sup>). Nevertheless, there is often an aim or at least a wish involved for some change or transformation to take place at the level of everyday life: a wish for at least some small difference, such as a change of perspective, to occur. This may be described by the words ‘magic’ or ‘miracle’, but it can also be (particularly in the vernacular of the people studied) simply called ‘something’.

We can see several matters becoming enchanted in angel practices. One such issue is agency: the women emphasize that they do things and make things happen *together with* angels. Angels thus become *partners* in enchanted agency (Ahearn 2001; Campbell 2005; Utriainen 2013b). The concerns that the women and angels tend together are mostly relational matters, such as relation to the self and to one’s desires and emotions. The interviewees also reflect on often fragile relations with others, including colleagues, friends and both living and dead family members (see also Day 2012).<sup>8</sup> Some of them also feel that with the angels they can change their relations with the future and imagine a better one; a good example of this is the letter written to the self during the angel visitation that is meant to be opened later in

life. Eventually the whole of life and destiny can come to be seen from a changed perspective, as described in the following account:

[W]e can’t lean on anything, because everything changes all the time and there are new tasks waiting all the time ... and they [the angels] send me to some unbelievable spots, and that’s the funniest thing here, that life becomes so extremely exciting.

Here angels provide the desired touch of magic that changes the individual’s perspective and transports her between the uncertainty of the present and the possibilities of future.

Enchanted angel moments may become possible with ritual framing that posits angels as ‘momentary gods’ (Gilhus 2012), creating instances of *momentary religiosity*, that is, religiosity which is not constant and stable but which may actualize in specific situations and passing moments. This idea comes close to Martin Stringer’s notions of situational belief and coping religion (Stringer 2008; see also Walter 2016). Stringer points out in his ethnography set in the UK that consulting horoscopes could become seriously religious on some occasions, particularly in moments of crisis, while being merely entertainment at other times. Angel enchantment was often about uplifting and aesthetically pleasing experience (the sheer surprise and pleasure of the idea of an angel’s feather or a sensation interpreted as the touch of an angel on one’s skin) but at other times it became a life supporting matter (when angels, according to many interviewees, become healers of depression and openers of possible future horizons).

## THE DYNAMIC OF FRAMING

There are many different forms, degrees and intensities of ritual action; there is also variation from clearly bounded and well-defined rituals to less bounded micro-rituals and even more vague or open-ended ritualization (Bell 1992). One category comprises those often routine, relatively simple and fluid rituals that Bell (2008: 540–541) calls tending rituals. In a good example of domestic tending rituals and ritualization that vary in intensity but are closely bound to everyday concerns, Marja-Liisa Keinänen (2010) provides a detailed description of the daily ritual order in the pre-modern Karelian household. Almost anything (eating, cleaning the space, division of labour, etc.) can be performed ritually. She shows, for example, how the table can be conceived of as ‘God’s palm’ and treated ritually, meaning that one should not sit on it or scratch it; food was always and only served on a covered table; and the table was always kept clean. In this way ritualization took the form of tending and caring and was intimately entwined with the most ordinary daily concerns.

Both in clearly bounded ritual and less bounded ritualization a key issue is the special framing of action. Frames constitute the framed thing, and enchantment, like other ritual effects, is brought forth by the ritual frame (see also Seligman et al. 2008: 84–93). Furthermore, ritual agency is enabled and constituted by the frame. William Sax (2008) emphasizes that ritual deliberately distributes and articulates agency among a number of actors besides humans, such as ancestors, spirits and traditional institutions. Furthermore, agency in ritual is not only distributed, but often also *participatory*; that is, actions are performed together, sometimes in collaboration with several quite disparate partners (see Campbell 2005, although her

discussion focuses not on ritual but narrative). Ritual framing and distributed participatory agency helps in understanding how many rituals can do what they do: transform something, juxtapose perspectives, or make a difference.

This combination of ritual frame and participatory agency can be further illustrated with the example provided by Keinänen (2010) where she describes how the plurality of actors and powers in the traditional Karelian household *together* became agentive through ritual framing. Some of the agents belonging to this particular ritual frame were human but many were otherworldly actors such as ancestors and spirits, as well as artefacts (icons, candles, thresholds, the traditionally structured space itself) and elements (directions, fire, water) or structural factors (such as the gender of the human actors which in Keinänen’s case was a very influential agentive element). In the case of pre-modern Karelia, the ritualizing was prescribed and expressed by the culture’s mixing Orthodox Christianity and folk religious traditions with their particular resources. The actors and resources are, of course, different in the context of my present ethnographic case.<sup>9</sup>

Empirically the issue of the ritual frame is often discussed when describing the concrete temporal and/or spatial settings for organizing ritual (such as securing the ritual space by drawing a circle, providing an altar or setting the table for a ritual meal; the use of special language and assuming special roles are also used as keys). The theoretical notion of frame is most often discussed in performative theories and in particular when reflecting on the relations between ritual, play and drama, that is, the similarities and distinctions between different kinds or levels of frame and the ways in which ritual is one special type of frame among others. The notion of frame goes back to Gregory Bateson’s and Erwin Goffman’s



ideas about framing as metacommunication, that is, as the various ways used for marking (in Goffman's words 'keying') that what happens should be understood in a changed and special way from its more ordinary, first-level meaning; for instance, a blow may not be a sign of aggression but playfulness (Goffman 1974; see also e.g. Bell 1997: 74, 160–161; Seligman et al. 2008: 62, 84–93).

The work of Don Handelman (2008), who elaborates Goffman's and Bateson's thinking, has been of special assistance in understanding the dynamics of the ritual frame whereby what Seligman describes as the subjunctive mode of 'as if' is enacted. According to Handelman, '[f]raming draws immediate attention to three major issues in studying ritual: the structuring of the ritual frame, the organization of ritual within the frame, and the relationships between the interior and exterior of the frame' (Handelman 2008: 572). My concern here is mostly with the third element, that is, the *dynamic relation between ritual frame and non-ritual life* and, particularly, in what ways and under what conditions the ritual frame and non-ritual life can co-exist and communicate in relatively secular contemporary society. Handelman's formulation of framing can also help to examine the almost imperceptible gradations between rituals and ritualization. It is only seldom that we find ourselves documenting a case of a clearly bounded ritual and its distinct frame; ritual action with momentary, fleeting and much less ostensive framing is much more common. It may also be, as Jørgen Podemann Sørensen (2008) mentions in passing in his text on ritual effect, that in real life ritual effect is likewise often merely momentary.

In the case of less clear framing, Handelman stresses, the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the ritual may be related to each other like the sides of the Moebius surface or ring, in

that they turn into one another often quite imperceptibly and without clear boundary or categorical difference. The Moebius ring is a surface that has only one side, though it can turn around and appear two-sided. In these kinds of instances of Moebius-type framing, ritual may become rather like a very momentary and passing subjunctive mode. It would thus be like a pulse of ritualizing that comes and goes in the midst of everyday life bringing some subtle if often also relevant difference to it. Something like this happens in some of the angel enchantments that quickly come and go in the midst of everyday life. This being the case we should perhaps talk about *framings* instead of frames—the emphasis being more on change and movement than two separate subsequent states. For Handelman, it is important that the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the ritual frame are understood as flexible and permeable and that the frame is not considered too linearly or hierarchically, or as a nicely nested distinction; it might rather be seen as something closely 'braided' together:

The ritual frame opens to the outside while enabling itself to be practiced as relatively closed. Through such framing, the outside is taken inside and integrated with the ritual. No less, the inside is taken outside of itself and thereby made part of the frame. Therefore, the frame is 'in process' within itself, and in an ongoing relationship to its inside and to its outside. (Handelman 2008: 578)

This dynamic process of 'braiding'—linking to what Seligmann et al. (2008: 84–97) write about as informal, optional and sometimes improvised transitions between frame and framed—may let different communicative realities slide into one another and, in this process of sliding,

produce a *complexity of perspectives* that can become a coping or enriching device when navigating between complex social situations and communicative context. Handelman writes that the *cronospace* of ritual is multifaceted and rhythmic.

I suggest that ritual framing can become dynamic in the sense of fleeting or otherwise often only minimally discernible enchantments in the midst of everyday social life. The framing that marks action as ritual may sometimes be so subtle, quickly passing and nearly unnoticeable that it becomes communicated only to those initiated even if and when it happens in a mixed social setting also involving non-participants. Besides the Moebius string and Gestalt psychology images (Seligman et al. 2008: 43–44), another rather good visualization and concretization of this kind of quick change of perspective might be the *lenticular image* that changes with one slight flip; lenticular images are an interesting optic and technical device often used in popular religious material, such as prayer cards depicting apparitions, for example. To take an example from the angel case, the feather on the street can act precisely like this: it can instantly change from a bird feather into an angelic feather. Another example that is performed in a different way: some of the women noted that in new company they carefully ‘drop in the word angel’ in order to detect if someone notices and is interested, withdrawing if that is not the case. This kind of subtlety can be reflected both with the idea of the lenticular image and that of the Moebius ring: ritual and non-ritual (‘inside’ and ‘outside’) may sometimes slide into one another without any clear-cut distinction.<sup>10</sup> This way of thinking about the subtle dynamism of the frame might also help us understand ritual creativity and innovation and the ways these innovations can come about not only from ‘outside’ the frame, as

straightforward reactions to social and cultural changes, but also from ‘inside’, following ritual’s own creative logic, as Handelman further elaborates (2008; see also Seligman et al. 2008: 91–93).<sup>11</sup>

One important aspect of ritually framing enchantment along these lines is that it may articulate, for the participants, some things as possible in different ways ‘inside’ the frame compared to how they would appear ‘outside’ the frame—while still retaining some connection between ‘the inside’ and ‘the outside’. This would be because the frame, up to a point and even if it is not very clearly marked, may posit its own pocket of reality, with (to some extent at least) its own logic, rules and ontology. And this may be important even if the touch of the other reality were to hold for just a short and fleeting moment, like a quick flash of one side of the lenticular image. In the case of the women doing things with the invisible and extraordinary in the midst of a relatively secular society, this enabling and productive (both material<sup>12</sup> and necessarily also imaginary) aspect of the ritual frame may become important. That is, something that is not possible or, perhaps, even desirable outside the frame may become that when within the frame—and if the inside and the outside touch one another, *things can be possible and impossible almost simultaneously*. Thus enchantment would become a potential enrichment, a light ‘touch of magic’ and support in everyday life.

The women who ritualize angels were different from one another (and any one person may be different in different contexts) and sensitive and skilful in framing to different degrees. They were also, in different ways and degrees, *learning to know* when and where the ritual frame can be keyed in and what can be done with it, as well as when it has to be downplayed. (Part of this learning takes place

in groups that meet to discuss and practice the ways of letting the otherworld touch this world and how to manage this, as will be briefly discussed below.) This sensitivity to shifting social and communicative contexts, and the skill with which this sensitivity is enacted, might be understood as an *art of ritual enchantment*. This art is related to the act and performance of managing the credibility of the enchantment that the ritual frame enables and produces. In my material, it is possible to identify several references to the sometimes critical issue of credibility and even outright credibility accounts and what we might call credibility work (which could also be approached as the work of authentication).<sup>13</sup>

## MANAGING CREDIBILITY WITH THE ART OF FRAMING

Enchantment with angels may be possible and credible in varying ways and degrees when one is in direct contact with the practiced ritual frame but it easily becomes a socially sensitive, even fragile, matter that is far from automatically credible when the practitioner is distanced from the frame and its persuasive sensorial, rhetoric and ontological power. As my interviewees frequently said, angels (as otherworldly relations) are not a topic one can with ease and without the fear of becoming socially compromised discuss in any context of modern secular society. In particular they mentioned family and work life as well as the church and their congregation as contexts which do not readily welcome this kind of enchanted talk of the otherworld. These sometimes very critical 'outside' contexts posed a challenge and even a threat to the credibility of the enchantment which, because it had become important to them, therefore needed careful protection and management.

Following Marcell Mauss, Talal Asad (1997: 47–48) writes that human bodies can be taught to reach spiritual experiences. Long term repetitive embodied experiences may even become a distinct religious habitus as Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling (2010) claim (see also Kupari 2016). However, the reverse also applies. Robert Orsi (2005: 12), for example, states that the modern world has systematically disciplined human senses so as not to experience sacred presence but to be tuned into its absence. In a similar way, Gillian Bennett (1987: 118), two decades earlier, recounted how European scientific, religious and political elites (from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards) had worked to eliminate belief in the supernatural so that it became, gradually, unfashionable, embarrassing and nearly unthinkable—and thus belonging in the sphere of privacy. The observations of both Orsi and Bennett point to the history of disenchantment and tackle the issue of credibility: in modernity, people may be allowed to meet their spirits in privacy but they take the social risk of losing face if they practice openly.

Today, there may be a slight change in this in the sense that religion, spirituality and the presence of the otherworld are becoming somewhat more visible topics in the public sphere (e.g., Nynäs, Lassander and Utriainen 2012). There was talk among the interviewees about positively interpreted changes in society where angels and other extraordinary contacts have become popular media topics which may be treated in a neutral or even slightly positive tone—for instance in women's magazines, popular culture and the Internet (see Utriainen 2013b; see also Uibu 2013; Walter 2011; 2016). Yet the interviewees also noted that public tolerance towards their interests and engagements was at best only relative and that they still often had to consider and regulate when and how to raise the topic, and be prepared to meet challenging

or even dismissive arguments from outsiders. Philip Manning's Goffmanian understanding of credibility implies that while it often means that nothing in particular is going on in social life and social interaction, extraordinary things breach this suspiciously:

Maintaining credibility involves the use of various kinds of resources and a willingness to abide by rules of conduct. When the social world is credible it is 'convincingly real,' which, in the context of everyday behavior, often means that participants have a sense that 'nothing' in particular is going on. (Manning 2000: 93)

There are two mutually entangling critical issues related to credibility and angel enchantments which I discuss here: first, the *credibility of the enchantment to the self*. One example of this is when an interviewee says that she has asked herself if what happens to her in the ritual frame such as meditation or angel visitation is credible (in the sense of possible as well as true/authentic) even in those moments when she is 'inside' the frame—or if the whole enchantment is too much out of the ordinary to become part of her life at all. Many women very poignantly talked about themselves in the interviews as rational, down-to-earth individuals who do not believe before they see, thus emphasizing that their angel experience was well beyond the 'nothing in particular'. Some of them also say that they were ready to question their own mental stability when or after encountering the otherworld; in reflecting on this they also knew that this was one way they were perceived by others. In one account a mother had faced these questions in relation to her young daughter who started to hear angels' voices talking to her. She talked about the uncertainty and difficult balancing that she had to go through for rather

a long time before she could confidently believe that her daughter's experience was benevolent instead of harmful to her.

Eventually, many women say, it is often incontrovertible experience of the beneficial effects of the enchantments which puts them at ease and gives them confidence—in other words, works as proof. This can, of course, also be approached as a traditional rhetorical strategy of giving special place to narratives of doubt in which one should not believe too easily but try to resist the extraordinary experience and struggle to test its authenticity as long as it is reasonable to do so.

Second, many interviewees also brought up the quite serious issue of *credibility with regard to their social life*. In these accounts, they ponder on such issues as how much they are able to share their enchantments with others. These others were either other people or the social world in a wider sense, though this issue became particularly important when it related to significant other individuals. Non-supportive, critical or outright aggressive family members and friends, or people in their Lutheran congregation (such as a very Christian mother, a secular friend or a rigorous pastor, for example), were recurring topics in the interviews. Some recounted the (fear of) losing friendships or partnerships because of their spiritual engagements, or felt that other people questioned their mental condition, rationality or self-judgment and that they were asked to satisfy the sceptics. Here the issue of credibility is not so much the authenticity of the enchantment but of the social integrity of the person in front of others. Nevertheless, the two aspects or levels of credibility (that of enchantment to the self and of the self in a social circle) may also closely intertwine.

One thing potentially enhancing and securing credibility, I was told, was the already

mentioned feeling that spiritual issues were increasingly positively received in culture and society—very much as a result of the media. Another way of maintaining credibility was learning to play with the art of ritual framing. In several interview accounts, and in fieldnotes on angel courses and meetings, a recurring issue is that of teaching oneself and others and learning from others how to skilfully manage when, where and in what ways to talk about angels—that is, when and how to key the frame in or out. The women shared tips concerning how to balance between practicing open communication versus downplaying and non-communicating the frame of enchantment. For instance, they talked about what words to use in different contexts. In preparing an ‘angel talisman’, there was group discussion on the issue that the word ‘talisman’ should be changed for ‘prayer ornament’ when used in a Christian context in order to be accepted and taken seriously (Utriainen 2016). In an interesting anecdote one woman recounted how she was able to see, by looking into her husband’s eyes, when she should stop talking about the otherworld so as not to embarrass him and risk their shared ordinary reality. Another woman asked the other participants in an ‘angel evening’, if she should encourage or discourage her son from speaking about angels at school. (She was advised to tell her son to keep a low profile to prevent bullying.) To summarise, the practitioners learned together to be sensitive to shifting contexts.

One important vehicle in framing and managing enchantment was *metaphor*. Ingvild Gilhus (2012), among others, stresses that religious language in many ways works with metaphor which can be understood in this case as one kind of hinge through which

angels turn from being spirits and religious beings into figures of speech or the other way around—something like what happens with the flip of the lenticular image. I would argue that metaphor, in a case such as angel enchantments, is a powerful vehicle of the subjunctive that may work as an interface between everyday realities and beyond, sometimes even extending to magic and efficacy (see also Seligman et al. 2008: 25). Indeed, angels effectively illuminate this dynamic between metaphor and magic and are fitting in contemporary, predominantly secular society; as a familiar, traditional and culturally well supported, even worn-out, image and metaphor (of grace, beauty, support, friendship, goodness, kindness, etc.), an angel can, when ritually framed, become a ‘momentary god’ (Gilhus 2012) with whom to intimately and/or effectively relate.

Metaphor also illuminates the Möbius ring-like nature of some ritual framing; in metaphor the more literal and the figural understandings—the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the frame—are closely related and sometimes nearly inseparable. Thus angels could sometimes be, within the ritual frame and among those who more or less share that frame, taken as possible and powerful spiritual presences and otherworldly relations, but they could also easily resume their ordinary status as mere safe and conventional metaphors if credibility was at stake. Sometimes the interviewee might quickly draw quotation marks in the air with her hands when saying the word ‘angel’, and thus the metaphor and magic could be there almost simultaneously. This flexibility and adjustability is what I call the dynamic ritual framing of enchantment and momentary religion within everyday reality.



## CONCLUSION

Through the case of angel practices we can detect some of the ways in which everyday matters of concern can be met with the special subjunctive or ‘as if’ that is enchantment. Enchantment can take the form of ‘momentary religion’ or only a light ‘touch of magic’, and it can be brought about with subtle ritual framing. With the help of Seligman and Handelman I have argued that the ritual frame, and in particular a certain kind of lightness and permeability that framing can assume, makes enchantment possible, and potentially effective and powerful in everyday life. Framing that enables distributed and participatory agency (acting together with angels or other otherworldly and extraordinary things) creates a complexity of perspective which can help deal with crises and several kinds of everyday matters and enrich quotidian life in ways ranging and changing from care and support to pleasure and entertainment, as well as from ‘religious’ to ‘secular’. Nonetheless, angel spirituality is sometimes regarded as weird and suspicious, and enchantments thus enacted may raise questions about credibility which cannot always be ignored or dismissed—both credibility to the self and credibility in the wider social circle. Subtle communicative strategies and tactical skills, including the skill to key the frame in and out and play with the metaphor, are therefore needed in order for people to fit enchantment into their lived religion as well as their modern secular lives. One issue closely related to the dynamism of framing in the case of the practices discussed here is that it becomes possible to learn to frame in and out together, in shared social contexts. As a kind of a hinge or lenticular image, ritual framing thus seems to be a cultural tool that enables navigating and managing the complexity of perspectives and multiple ontologies present in pluralist contemporary society.

## NOTES

- 1 Seligman opposes the ideal type of ritual *subjunctive* to that of the *sincerity* mode of life, which he sees as very much a modern Enlightenment idea that seeks to find, beneath complexities, a pure and ‘authentic’ core often in some transcendent ideal or the human expression itself. See also Seligman et al., 2008.
- 2 Inger Sjørølev (2012) provides another possible way of conceiving of the juxtaposition of ritual and non-ritual. She focuses on ritual bodies as material indexes that with their highlighted materiality point to possible futures.
- 3 This research is part of the project ‘Post-secular culture and a changing religious landscape in Finland’ at Åbo Akademi University (2010–2014) wherein we have constructed ethnographic accounts of cases exemplifying the changing relations between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ in present-day society. Cases within the project with which the angel ethnography has particularly close contact points are those dealing with spiritual healing and wellbeing practices such as Yoga, Shamanic and African drumming, as well as Charismatic healing, some of which are more clearly religious in a traditional sense than others. We have explored, for instance, how these practices relate to agency in modern (post)secular society (e.g., Utriainen, Hovi and Broo 2012). The interviews are stored in the Folklore archive of Åbo Akademi University, Turku.
- 4 Drape and Barker 2010; cf. Martin Stringer 2008. The respondents of my survey were 94 % women. See Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2012) for sociological explanations of gender imbalance in everyday religion.
- 5 The course was organized during the winter of 2012 over two weekends with more than a month’s break between the weekends including individual homework. The course was held in the home of the female teacher-healer in Helsinki. The six female participants, mostly from the metropolitan area, were familiarized with angel traditions and with some concrete angel-healing techniques.
- 6 Channelling is one of the most iconic rituals in New Age culture and has been ethnographically examined in detail by Adam Klin-Oron (2014).
- 7 E.g., Stringer calls this ‘non-empirical other’ whereas I have called it ‘intimate alterity and transcendent’ because it is often felt very



- empirically but also understood as 'something other' than the quotidian life.
- 8 In his online research on angels Walter (2016) discovered that dead humans were often understood to become angels; this was less so in my materials where angels more often acted as intermediaries between the living and dead family members.
  - 9 There is presently a growing research literature on how different things can become animated and agentive in ritual or ritual-like contexts and how this may open different life-worlds and ontologies, including in modern contexts (e.g., Harvey 2012; Whitehead 2014).
  - 10 Handelman is suggesting a similar kind of amendment to the 'outside' and 'inside' of the ritual frame distinction as some critics have done to the Durkheimian sacred-profane distinction when approaching it as a living field of difference rather than as rigid and exclusive categories.
  - 11 For him, this kind of framing would not be simple hierarchical metacommunication in the sense of Bateson and Goffman.
  - 12 Ritual and the subjunctive mode build into the power of materiality in many ways. Birgit Meyer (2006) introduces the notion 'sensational form' in order to capture the power that material objects may get in meditation of religious contents and forces.
  - 13 Cf. emotion-work (Hochschild 1979).
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